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Framing the Debate

Mission History and the Postcolonial Museum

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The development of the museum in Western contexts – simplistically put from (extended) cabinets of curiosities to more organised showcases for promoting knowledge and colonial dominance – is a profoundly politicised movement and was never simply about the "pure" promotion of culture or global art. Indeed, as Edward Said notes (1993: 5):

> … we must attempt ... [to] set the art in the global, earthly context. Territory and possessions are at stake, geography and power. Everything about human history is rooted in the earth, which has meant that we must think about habitation, but it has also meant that people have planned to *have* more territory and therefore must do something about its indigenous residents. At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others.

That act of thinking about, settling on, controlling land is intimately bound up with the creation of knowledge, as Said, developing Foucault's reflections on knowledge and power, showed in his earlier book, "Orientalism" (1978). That such knowledge lacked any significant sense of the interdependence of global histories and the necessary interaction of cultures (Said 1993: 43) is now widely understood, and in recent years, such historicisation has been developing an increasing sense of the importance of these factors.

This has come from various directions, be they the postcolonial movements in the widest sense (from Fanon to Abu Lughod, to the Subaltern Studies group, and many more), or the more recent movements towards world and global history,[1] and the collective efforts of Jalagin, Tavera, and Dilley (2011) and others.[2] This collection of essays is intended to be a further contribution to these postcolonial and global history discourses, seeking to highlight aspects of postcolonial anthropological concern in the context of museological studies, and, in part, missiology. Museum collections represented and embodied global connections: after all, at the most basic level, the removal of an object from one part of the world for display in another represents a connection between the site of origin and the site of display, and a collection of such objects represents a deliberately thought-through and systematised connection. This does

1 Bayly (2004); Gran (2009); Parthasarathi (2011); McNeill and Pomeranz (2015a, 2015b).

2 See <www.CLIOHWorld.net>, particularly noteworthy in this regard.

not mean, of course, that such objects were always obtained in consensual and appropriate ways, as the numerous ongoing disputes over museum collections show. The gradual recognition in American and European museums of Native American rights to certain objects is in stark contrast to, e. g., the British Museum's reluctance to return the Parthenon Marbles to Greece, highlighting the highly differentiated nature of such developments.

What is clear is that material collections have long connected histories, and these are not just reference points to the distant past or location: collections define both museums' and their communities' self-identity in the present, and project beyond the present into future understandings of a place in the world. This is most obviously the case with museums claiming a broader identity, such as a "national" museum. This connection between past, present, and future takes various forms, but as Said and many others have highlighted, these connections are never neutral: "Everything about human history is rooted in the earth ...". T. J. Demos (2013: 8), discussing the importance of contemporary photography in documenting injustices in postcolonial African settings, argues that

> [t]hose injustices are often repressed in European consciousness and visual culture, yet still frequently and stubbornly emerge in its discourse and representation. The often unrecognized and generally inadequately interrogated historical presence, material traces, and psychic scars of colonialism, passed through generations, also creep up in current forms of economic and political inequalities ... inequalities that colonial relations, of course, played an important role in defining. ... Given the fact that there is no firm separation from, or clear European conscience in relation to the colonial past, in many ways, the colonial era never actually ended.

This unending nature of the colonial era is reflected not only in the contemporary photography that Demos discusses, but is an integral element of other kinds of "material traces." At the latest with Bruno Latour's work, the significance of material traces in understanding the global and temporal connections is an integral part of global historiography and critical thinking. This very obviously includes museums, constituted as collections of material objects based on changing classificatory systems connecting the past, present, and future, usually with the promise of increasing knowledge and understanding. As Henrietta Lidchi notes, the forming of an archive or collection "implies a classificatory move relating to status and function" (2009: 56). These are obviously not static or uniform processes: for example, Inbal Livne (2013) shows that in the 19th and early 20th centuries, different (types of) collectors in Tibet had different aims, and the Scottish institution she mostly focuses on over time developed its purpose to reflect changing priorities.

Recognising that both the underlying purposes of collecting objects *and* the taxonomies used for different objects in museums changed over time, means, of course, that it is partly in analysing these changes that we can discover significant new interpretations. For example, there is a common understanding that Western museums frequently expressed a desire to include "good" examples of material objects from various contexts, and at times replaced one item with another that was deemed to be of better quality or more representative (Livne documents such discussions in the Scottish/Tibetan context [2013]). Equally, however, we find examples of multiple objects that serve a particular intellectual agenda, such as Augustus Henry Lane Fox's decision to collate photographic evidence of race by exploring "dominant European racial types" in order to "generalize race" through a "mean based on as large a sample as possible" – this would enable scholars to engage in what was termed "comparative physiognomy" (Morton 2015: 110; Lane Fox is more commonly known as Pitt-Rivers after inheriting the Cranborne Chase estate of Lord Rivers – Morton 2015: 102). It is clear that the developing ideas of a collection and what belonged in it – as well as what did not – was almost always of equal importance to the individual objects that constituted the collection.

Nineteenth and early twentieth century museums were often closely connected to missionary activity, and missions themselves were an integral part of the colonial enterprise. Indeed, an important factor, that impacts on these questions in a wider sense, is the disproportionate significance of missionary activity in the broad setting of empire. The impact of missions in colonial spaces was often disproportionate to their status at home. Although seen by many as a dominant concern of the imperial era, missions were largely a minority pursuit, even within the churches. Their influence, certainly in terms of the wider impact of missions and missionaries on indigenous populations, cannot to be measured solely on the basis of their popularity – or otherwise – in the West. My own work in this field (2006: 141ff.) picks up on the likes of Ross (1972) and Cannadine (2001) in showing the limited engagement even within the churches.

Connections to museums, however, offered an additional avenue for missionaries and missions as institutions to engage with the wider public – in many cases it was undoubtedly a factor in the efforts that mission supporters needed to make in order to encourage continuing funds, personnel, and broader societal engagement. However, it would be too simplistic to argue that mission interest in scientific study was simply about such questions. Rather, ethnographic study and connections to museums fitted a broader pattern of thought, as Jane Samson, writing about missions to Pacific islanders argues (2001: 101f.):

> What mission expansion did complement was the high tide of ethnological speculation about the origin and diversity of humanity, to which missionary observations of Pacific islanders added a great deal. This speculation … was undoubtedly an Enlightenment project. … "Shall Religion refuse to follow, where the love of Science leads?" wondered the author of *The Spirit of Christian Missions*.

Whilst monogenist ethnology in the early and mid-nineteenth century dominated, with proponents arguing that "'all men were one in origin, and there was no suggestion that they might not be one in destiny'", Samson notes that "Mission anthropology was, and still is, about the subversion of determinism; missions are about change" (Samson 2001: 109, quoting George Stocking). This was not straightforward for the missionaries (or it might be added, their target audiences): "missionaries experienced a genuine internal struggle between their abhorrence of island cultural practices and their need to retain faith in the universal message of Christianity" (Samson 2001: 121).

Engaging in scientific activities such as ethnography and collecting, therefore, was not just about raising interest in the missions. They often took on a wider significance beyond interest in mission work, and many of the missionaries who engaged in ethnographic work took it tremendously seriously, at times allowing it to eclipse their missionary work altogether. Many had also a profound awareness of the impact of colonialism on local societies and the missionaries' (perceived, at least) role in preserving some record of what was being lost, as, for example, Lorenzo Macagno (2009: 69) shows, in quoting Henri-Alexandre Junod:

> En 1930, nous assistons à l'invasion générale de tout le territoire de la tribu par la civilisation européenne et les changements, que les decades précédents avaient vu se produire lentement, devienent rapide et profonds. De plus en plus, la tribu perd sa cohesion; l'autorité des chefs diminue et celle des Administrateurs blancs s'accroît. Quant aux tabous et aux dieux-ancêtres, on n'y croit plus guère.

It is clear, then, that missionary involvement in museums and collections took place against a backdrop of multiple motivations and contexts, which give a nuanced and continually changing perspective on the missionaries, their collections, and the museums they were involved in, as well, of course, as their target populations. The collection of essays offered here reflects that diversity.

These essays arose in the context of a collaborative project between the National Museums Scotland and the University of Stirling, that included the funding of a PhD on Tibetan objects in Scottish museum contexts; Inbal Livne, one of the authors, was a student in that project (Livne 2013), supervised by Henrietta Lidchi of National Museums Scotland, Timothy Fitzgerald, and myself. This project was generously funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council through a Collaborative Doctoral Award. Together with Rajalakshmi Nadadur Kannan, I organised a workshop in May 2014 to bring the project to a conclusion, and most of the articles here were presented in that setting. The workshop call for papers asked participants to address:

> … the terms employed for the objects themselves and the categories that museums deploy for the conventional purposes of interpretation and display. For example, the uncritical use of terms such as "religion," "art," or "ethnography" have a profound effect on how material culture is presented in museums and studied in universities.

It was noted that several factors played a role in understanding how such language informed the understanding of the objects being collected, whether this be questions of provenance, ideology, the stated and inferred purposes of museums, the biographical positionality, and status of collectors and their methods, and more. The stimulating range of articles offered examined various aspects of these questions.

Inbal Livne's article discusses the meanings and values given to Tibetan material culture by collectors, and shows how classificatory systems were key in this regard: whether something was regarded as "religious" or not, or as "artistic" or "ethnographic" helped to determine its value on numerous levels. She shows some of the ways in which understanding these categories can help to understand relationships between objects and people in the context of British-Indian colonial society.

None of the knowledge being created through the collectors' actions was outwith such relationships, and understandings of Tibet were mediated through them.

Having above mentioned missionaries who devoted more of their time to scholarly work, Rebecca Loder-Neuhold discusses the Saint Gabriel Mission Museum near Vienna, which, despite its missionary connection, placed more emphasis on the scientific nature of its work. The museum reflected the interests of those who ran it, who fostered connections well beyond the missionary sphere to other academic institutions and scholars, emphasising the role of missionaries in the Enlightenment project of knowledge-accumulation (including the creation of the very journal that is now publishing these essays). In this, the "religious" nature of the missions' work was not always as clear as some might have expected it to be.

In more contemporary times, Jennifer Way highlights the complex nature of American museum practices in relation to Vietnamese objects. The tracing of such changes tells us much about American difficulties in relation to Vietnam during the mid- to late-twentieth century, including very obviously the context of war. The classificatory problems the Americans encountered (art, handicrafts, ethnography, etc.) reflected this confusion. As Way shows, Vietnamese objects were subjected "to American practices of knowledge, collecting activity, and diplomacy" and this paralleled problems encountered in the 19th century with, for example, the way British museums sought to understand Tibetan (and other) artefacts.

Finally, Rajalakshmi Nadadur Kannan points to the act of collecting both objects and ideas out with a museum context, but with similar classificatory issues highlighting the ways in which such acts of collecting can reflect and influence wider societal norms. Indian nationalists adopted certain British colonial classificatory systems and used these in the furtherance of particular aims that involved gendered and caste-based discrimination in order to elevate certain understandings of national identity. Kannan argues that particular women's bodies were "collected" in this context, widening the scope of what collecting and classification can mean in the colonial setting.

It is hoped that this collection, edited by Rajalakshmi Nadadur Kannan and myself, makes a valuable contribution to a number of fields, addressing the importance of understanding classification and categorisation in thinking about museum collections and missions. These are collections of alterities, of "the Other," but more than that: they *make* the Other, distinguishing between and creating an "us" and a "them" – and that (generally unspoken) form of classification dominates all the classificatory systems that might exist within a museum and its collections. If the "golden age of the relationship between museums and anthropology came at the moment when the main task of anthropology was defined as the study of the material manifestations of all mankind [sic]" (Boursiquot 2014: 66), then the ethnographic museum represented a repository for such study. As anthropology has developed towards seeking ways of understanding power, meaning, symbolism, and practices, museums have sought to reflect that; as the essays here show, this can be a slow, halting, and not always very consistent development. Iain Chambers notes a distinction between "the *power of curating* and the *curating of power*" (2014: 242; his italics). As will be apparent from the essays here, a clear element in that distinction – and, therefore, a move towards a postcolonial museum – is an understanding of the nature and power of classificatory language, systems, and inclinations. If this collection can contribute towards that discourse, that would be a fitting conclusion to the AHRC-sponsored project with which these essays originated.

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Michael Kraus, Ernst Halbmayer, Ingrid Kummels (eds.), Berlin 2018, 398 pp., ISBN 978-3-7861-2795-6.

Durante la conferencia internacional "Objetos como testigos del contacto cultural. Perspectivas interculturales de la historia y del presente de las poblaciones indígenas del alto río Negro (Brasil/Colombia)", que se realizó en 2014 en el Ethnologisches Museum de Berlín, se evaluaron críticamente las investigaciones recientes e históricas sobre la región multicultural del alto río Negro. Se reunieron y contrastaron las perspectivas de diferentes actores en base de sus respectivas especializaciones sobre la historia de contacto de la región, sobre la situación actual y sobre el significado de la cultura material en este proceso. Participaron por lo tanto representantes de los kotiria (wanano) y wira poná (desana), miembros de los museos, antropólogos académicos y activistas.

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